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## Feathered Pipe Ranch

*Mountain Retreat*

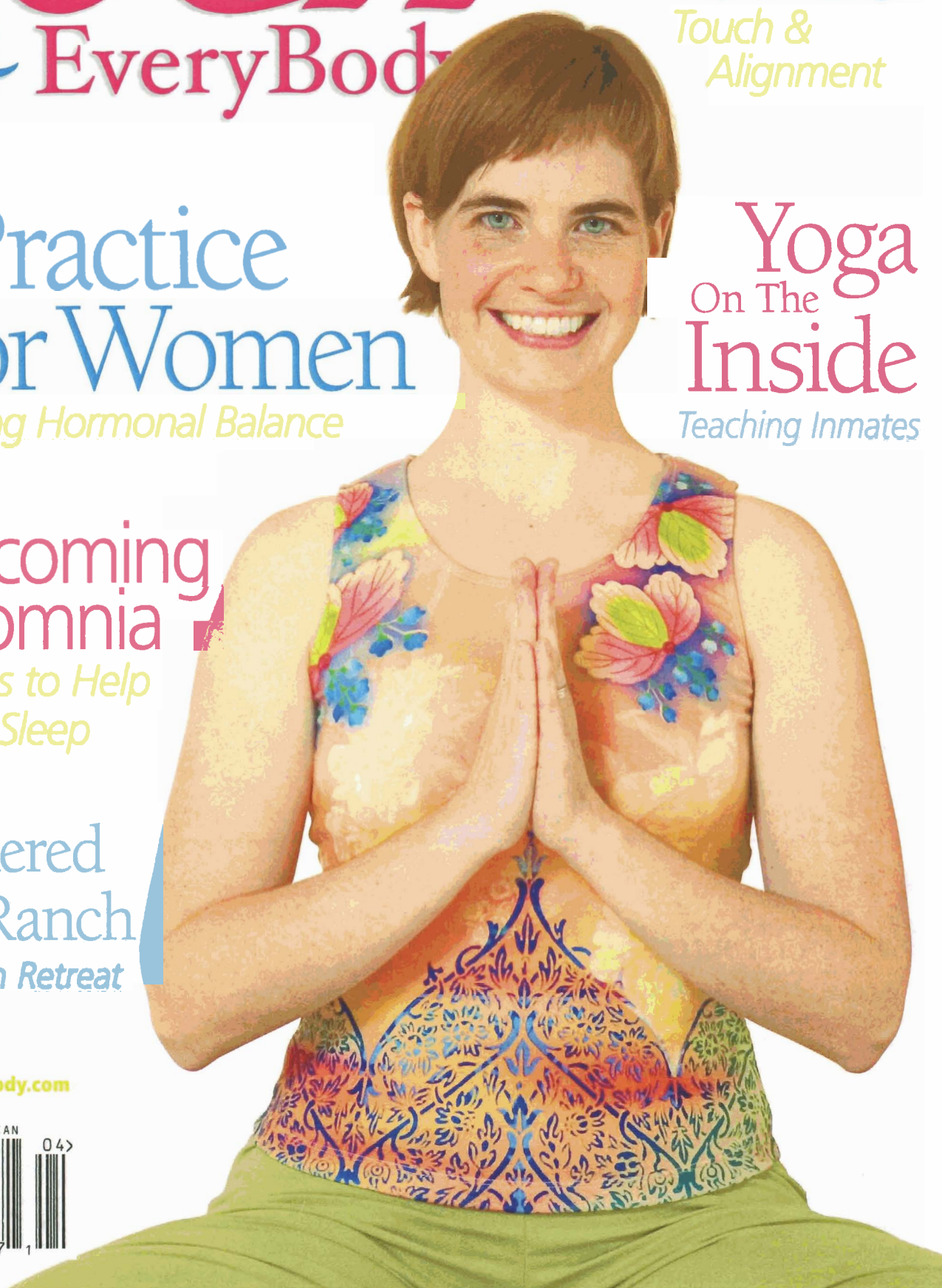
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# Feathered Pipe Ranch

## On Sacred Ground

*Celebrating 30 years of  
History and Healing*

*By Cynthia Robertson*

Photos courtesy of Feathered Pipe Ranch

I landed in Helena, Montana, with the usual nervous rumblings that occur before embarking on a weeklong retreat with strangers. Unlike a good friend of mine who had made the Feathered Pipe Ranch her destination for the past seven summers, I had only a vague idea of what my encounter would bring. I knew the idea of sleeping in a tipi in the woods sounded adventurous and I figured it would be a step up in comfort from my usual summer backpacking trips. I was looking forward to a week of daily Yoga practice with Judith Lasater, senior Yoga instructor and author who had inspired my earlier practice, both in the classroom and in her writings. And I was happy to return to the healing air and beauty of the Rocky Mountains and the big sky country of Montana. This was all I needed to know as I stood in the lobby of the airport with a small group of yogis who had also just arrived. Strangers, we introduced ourselves and waited for the shuttle that would take us to our home for the coming week.

We arrived after a short drive from Helena and were shown to our accommodations, which included rooms in the lodge, cabins, yurts, large tents and tipis in the woods—varying degrees

of comfort and wilderness to fit everyone's needs. Lunch was waiting for us too, which was good news for us hungry travelers. We ate outside the main lodge under a covered, clear tarp, where all the meals were served buffet style. Gourmet vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes awaited us three times a day, followed by delicious desserts, all prepared by cooks who seemed more like family than kitchen staff. During our first evening we had an orientation meeting and continued settling in. Later, as the chill of the mountain air moved in, I walked to the bathhouse where I indulged in the comfort of the sauna and hot tub—treats I took advantage of every night before turning in.

The Feathered Pipe Ranch, named after the ceremonial pipe used in rituals by the Cree and Blackfoot Indian tribes of the area, sits on 110 acres of pristine forest in the shadow of the Black Mountain Range of the Rocky Mountains. Nearly one million acres of National Forest surround the ranch. Miles and miles of hiking trails lead to breathtaking views of these mountains, lush meadows in full bloom, and the stillness of ancient aspen groves. I found myself wanting to wake early everyday to make the optional 7 a.m. walks led by India Supera, found-

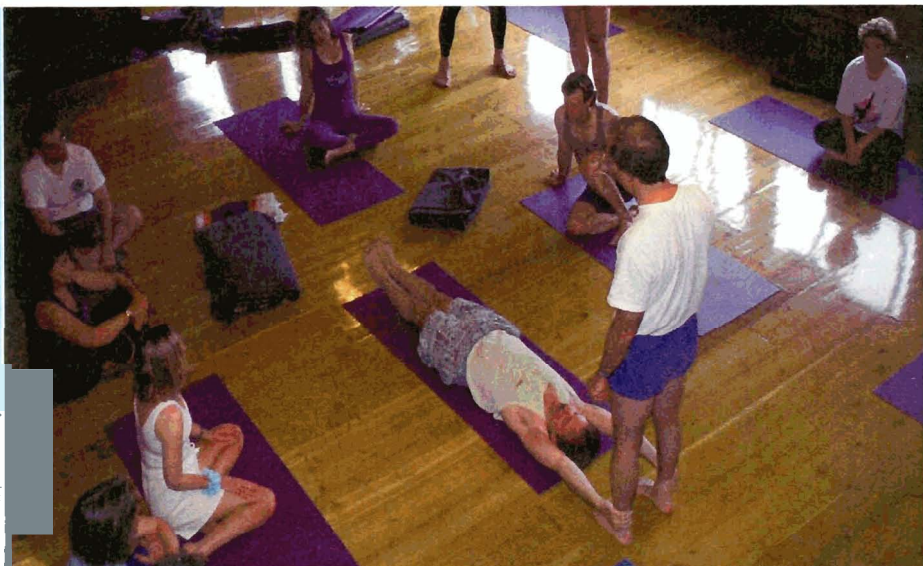
er and executive director of the ranch. We'd move along, taking in the quiet of the morning, waking up as we walked, and listening to the stories India would tell about her life, the ranch and the people who inspired her journey.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Feathered Pipe Ranch. When I asked India what kinds of events would be included in the anniversary celebrations, she replied, "Lots of prayers and lots of walks in the woods to celebrate the fact that we're still walking." It's obvious India and the members

of the Feathered Pipe Foundation have traveled more than a million miles since the Feathered Pipe Foundation opened its doors to the public in 1975 as one of the first yoga retreat centers in the United States. In the early days at the ranch there were ten founding members (including India and Judith Lasater), a small yoga school and the Holistic Life University. The well known *Yoga Journal* saw its inception there in the early '70s with a mere 12 pages on newsprint and a small distribution to yoga students living in San Francisco.

A good friend of India's named Jerry Duncan formerly owned the ranch. When Jerry fell ill with cancer, she told India that she knew the land was sacred, and that she did not want it to fall in the hands of anyone but her. Thus began the long process of discernment for India, who had for years prior to this been living and traveling in Asia and who, after meeting Sai Baba, had become his devout student. She had plans to live the life of a renunciant. Owning land and taking on the responsibility of the ranch was not in the picture. So India sought guidance through various means including Native American ceremonial sweats, a journey back to India to see Sai Baba and many prayers. During this challenging time, she had a vision in which she was asked to train leaders in the world. The time to accept her new calling had come. She inherited the ranch in 1973 when Jerry Duncan passed on. "Visions are easy," says India. "It's what you do with them that's hard."

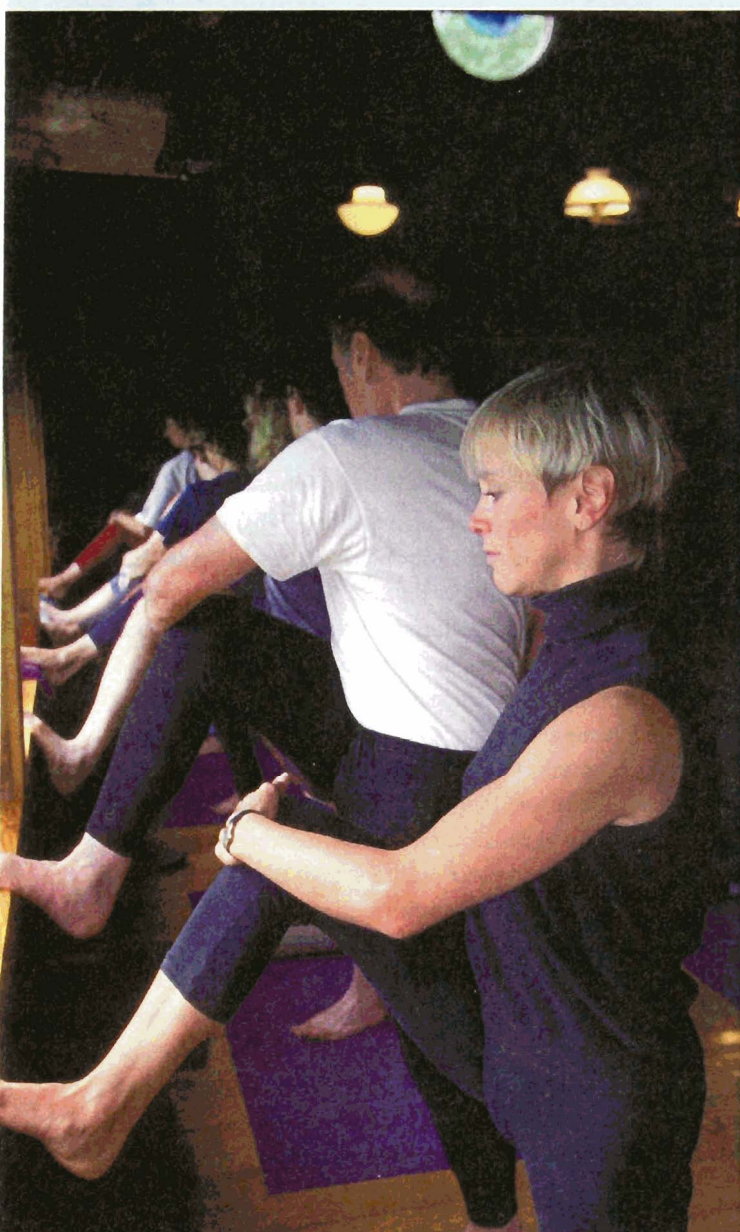
Today, the Feathered Pipe Ranch has grown into one of America's premier retreat centers. Each year it offers a wide variety of seminars including Yoga, holistic health, spirituality, bodywork, belly dancing, and other areas of personal growth. These seminars are in keeping with the spirit of its mission, which seeks "to provide educational programs and experiences in a nurturing environment where people can learn to enrich their minds, bodies and spiritual well-being." This mission has been accomplished for thousands of people during the past three decades. Some of the senior teachers that return regularly to the ranch include Judith Lasater, Angela Farmer, John Schumacher, Patricia Walden and Erich Schiffman. One longtime participant expressing his sentiments about what draws



people to the ranch said, "People do not remain unchanged here. The yoga training is exceptional. Things that separate us in our daily lives are erased here, are left at the gate." And isn't this what Yoga is all about?

Our daily morning and afternoon yoga sessions took place in a beautiful practice room in the main lodge overlooking the ranch's lake, mountains and pines. Because there is only one seminar at a time at the ranch, our group developed a level of closeness and comfort with one another that made our daily yoga practice together even more meaningful. Judith Lasater brought us a perfect blend of meditation, asana (posture) and pranayama (breathing) practice into each session. One of the original founding members, she has returned to Feathered Pipe every year since. When asked what brought her back year after year, Lasater replied, "It's one of the places where I experience continuity of place." She continued, "There are a lot of distractions in our lives. Here we lose these distractions. We sit on the porch and connect with each other. It fulfills us." An important part of healing comes from finding this connection with others, and the atmosphere of the ranch helps make this happen.

In addition to the myriad workshops offered at the ranch, the Foundation also sponsors an impressive array of projects



seeking to “gain resources to further humanitarian efforts and to preserve endangered cultures and traditions.” The Foundation continues its ongoing support of Native American culture through its annual Peace Encampment program. Pat Kennedy, a highly respected Native American elder of the Cree tribe, who brings people together in traditional ceremonies of prayer and dance, leads these encampments. The Tibetan Children’s Education Foundation provides funding and learning resources to promote the education of Tibetan children in exile. The Tibetan Thangka Artists Project will invite three Tibetan artists in exile to participate in a three-month residency program in Montana, offering them a peaceful workspace where they can paint uninterrupted as well as collaborate and discuss their work with other artists. These thangka paintings will be exhibited in schools and museums throughout the Northwest, thereby increasing awareness and understanding of Tibetan culture. The Foundation also co-sponsors numerous HIV/AIDS projects including retreats for men and women offering them much needed educational and spiritual support. And there is a Feathered Pipe Scholarship Fund that is awarded to seminar participants (primarily yoga teachers) who would otherwise be unable to attend the retreats at the ranch.

On my last morning at Feathered Pipe, after making my goodbyes and exchanging email addresses, I wandered the grounds one final time to reflect on the week’s transformative power. India’s vision of Feathered Pipe “to bring Yoga, healing and prayer to America” is alive and well. The mountain lake, its marsh, the geese overhead, the boulders, the aspen bark, the cabin walls, the stones around the fireplace, the cats, dogs, deer, bear and elk all hold the stories of this sacred ground. May the stories continue to be told for the next 30 years.

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*Cynthia Robertson is a high school French teacher in San Francisco, CA. Her love of yoga began in Sri Lanka in 1988. She is a freelance writer and yoga practitioner in Oakland, CA.*